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Sexualities and Genders in Zapotec Oaxaca

by
Lynn Stephen

The southern Mexican state of Oaxaca provides a cross-section of the multiple gender relations and sexual behaviors and roles that coexist in modern Mexico. Looking at contemporary gender and sexuality in two Zapotec towns highlights the importance of historical continuities and discontinuities in systems of gender and their relationship to class, ethnicity (earlier coded as race), and sexuality. The various sexual roles, relationships, and identities that characterize contemporary rural Oaxaca suggest that instead of trying to look historically for the roots of "homosexuality," "heterosexuality," or even the concept of "sexuality," we should look at how different indigenous systems of gender interacted with shifting discourses of Spanish colonialism, nationalism, and popular culture to redefine gendered spaces and the sexual behavior within them. Clear differences between elites and those on the margins of Mexican society underscore the importance of divisions by class and status.

I begin by presenting ethnographic snapshots of gender and sexuality in two different sites in contemporary Oaxaca that will provide a sense of the uniqueness of each place and the great variety found within this relatively small geographic area. Some of the key elements that emerge from these snapshots are a third gender role for biologically sexed men in Zapotec communities, the muted presence of a gender hierarchy in which women's sexual activity is controlled before and during marriage, an alternative discourse among Zapotec migrants that grants both men and women some independent control over their sexuality within the bounds of serial monogamy, and the emergence of sexual identities apart from gender, including "gay," "homosexual," "*joto*," and "*maricón*" as imports from elsewhere in Mexico and the United States. The remainder of the analysis attempts to link these contemporary elements of gender and sexuality to their historical roots.

The descriptions of sexual behavior and its links to gender and sexual identities that follow are based on both formal anthropological fieldwork, including extensive interviews, conversations, participant observation, and discussion groups, and personal participation in the social life of the

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communities described. Since 1983 I have spent at least a month every year, and often many more, living in Mexico—primarily in Oaxaca. From 1984 to 1986 I lived continuously in Teotitlán del Valle and frequently visited Juchitán de Zarragoza. In the mid-1990s I regularly spent several months a year in urban Oaxaca, Teotitlán del Valle, and two other communities as well as visiting Juchitán several times. Over the past 18 years I have developed extensive personal friendship networks and relationships of extended family and *compadrazgo* (ritual kinship) in Teotitlán del Valle and Juchitán de Zarragoza. I have followed the lives of individuals and families in these places for a long time and engaged in intimate conversations with many. Drawing the line between "in the field" and "out of the field" becomes a futile exercise when one's field of research is also in one's life through time. Because the topic of sexuality is so deeply personal, much of what I learned about it from others comes as much from personal relationships as it does from formal research techniques and structured questioning. What follows is therefore a composite analysis based on both systematic inquiry and the daily-life interactions that have been a part of my world for the past 17 years.

ZAPOTEC GENDER AND SEXUALITY 1: *MUXE* IN JUCHITÁN

Juchitán de Zarragoza is a sprawling urban/rural area that could be characterized as a large town or a small city. In the early 1990s its population was estimated to be at least 80,000 (Binford and Campbell, 1993: 4). It sits on the central plain of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, close to the Pacific Ocean. Its economy is a mixture of agriculture (corn, cattle, sugarcane, sesame, and soybeans) and industry (lime, cement, and refined petroleum). Its predominant language is Zapotec, which was spoken by approximately 341,000 people in the state of Oaxaca in 1990 (Consejo Estatal de Población de Oaxaca, 1994: 49). A majority of Zapotec-speakers (about 80 percent) also speak Spanish.

Juchitán is unique in Oaxaca for the daily use of the Zapotec language and the people's strong sense of local nationalism tied to a history of political struggles to maintain regional and local autonomy. In 1848 Gregorio Meléndez declared the separation of the Isthmus from the state of Oaxaca, and for three years he led a resistance campaign against the soldiers of Benito Juárez (see Tutino, 1993). A later regional rebellion in Juchitán led by Che Gómez from 1911 to 1913 is viewed by many as an important part of Oaxaca's participation in the Mexican Revolution (see Campbell, 1990). Another Zapotec political movement, the Coalition of Workers, Peasants,

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and Students of the Isthmus (COCEI), has governed Juchitán since 1989 after years of confrontation with local police and the Mexican army (see Rubin, 1997). What has remained distinct about Juchitán through history is the importance of Zapotec ethnic identity and the use of that identity as a basis for regional political autonomy.

While it is incorrect to call Juchitán a "matriarchy," women do participate in public and ritual life in ways that could be considered unusual in other parts of the country. They dominate the local market and business scene and spend time in practically exclusive female company at *velas* and other fiestas. *Velas* are elaborate several-day celebrations involving processions, masses, food preparation and blessing, drinking, and dancing organized around neighborhoods and families (Rubin, 1997: 39). Hundreds of guests attend, and sponsoring households may expend a year or more of income on the festivities. Women eat, drink, and dance together at fiestas. They are occasionally rumored to have sexual liaisons and relationships with one another while married (see Chiñas, 1995, for discussion of *marimachas*—women who have sexual relations with other women). Some married women have also had sexual relations with men other than their husbands. At the same time, women are often victims of domestic abuse, may have to negotiate with their husbands on a variety of issues, and with some notable exceptions have not assumed political leadership roles in city, state, or grassroots politics (see Rubin, 1997: 230-233). Younger women may follow traditional patterns of saving their virginity for marriage (a part of which is the showing of a bloody sheet on the wedding night) or live with boyfriends in serial monogamy.

Juchitec men also demonstrate an interesting variety of gender relations and sexualities. While most are either married or dating and not yet married, a small number of men assume the role of *muxe*. Chiñas (1995: 294) defines *muxe* as "persons who appear to be predominantly male but display certain female characteristics" and fill a "third gender role between men and women, taking some of the characteristics of each." *Muxe* are perceived as different from other men. Some marry women and have children; others form long-term partnerships with men. A distinguishing characteristic of many *muxe* is that they may do certain kinds of women's work such as embroidery or decorating home altars, but others do the male work of making jewelry. Many now have white-collar jobs and are involved in politics.

Muxe men are not referred to as "homosexuals" but constitute a separate category based on gender attributes. People perceive them as having the physical bodies of men but different aesthetic, work, and social skills from most men. They may have some attributes of women or combine those of men and women. While *muxe* do not exhibit all of the characteristics associated with masculinity, neither do they necessarily reject them. As Chiñas

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(1995: 297) points out, there is no inevitable connection between the way *muxe* dress and act and "homosexuality."

Jeffrey Rubin (1997: 233) writes that "prominent men rumored to be homosexual who did not adopt the *muxe* identity were spoken of pejoratively." This observation suggests that the *muxe* role is institutionalized for men and therefore socially tolerated. While Chiñas maintains that *muxe* are not discriminated against in a smaller community where she conducted research, Howard Campbell (1990) reports having heard disparaging remarks about *muxe* from political activists in Juchitán. In my experience, women, particularly mothers and sisters, speak fondly of sons and brothers who are *muxe*, and young unmarried women often have *muxe* as part of their circle of friends. The loyalty and helpfulness of *muxe* for female relatives is often contrasted with the laziness and irresponsibility of husbands (both imaginary and real).

Muxe are differently evaluated by men and women. Because they may not meet all of the norms of Zapotec masculinity—exhibiting physical strength in rural labor, socializing with men, maintaining a public face of authority in their homes and on the street—they may be disparaged by men because they are a constant reminder of the constructedness of masculinity. Heterosexuality does not seem to be a dominant part of the masculine image. These observations suggest that in Juchitán, it is gender not sexuality that is the major axis of social and cultural identity.

The presence of the *muxe* gender role for men and its possible preference over other identities such as "homosexual" for men whose dress, work skills, aesthetic preferences, and social skills are different from those of others suggest the continued importance of indigenous gender systems that allow for more flexible models not attached to specific sexual identities. Such models were documented by the Spaniards and contrast with the two-gender system of complementarity that many scholars attribute to the Mexica. At the same time, the coexistence of the *muxe* role with other masculine roles that put men in positions of dominance in relation to women suggests the influence of the Spanish colonial two-gender system, which resulted in gender hierarchy and often subordinated women's sexuality to that of men.

ZAPOTEC GENDER AND SEXUALITY 2: MARRIAGE, COHABITING MIGRANTS, AND *BIZA'AH* IN TEOTITLÁN DEL VALLE

The Zapotec community of Teotitlán del Valle is located about 45 kilometers from the capital city of Oaxaca, on the edges of the Tlacolula arms of the

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central Oaxaca Valley a few kilometers off the Pan-American Highway. Traditionally a subsistence agricultural community that also produced textiles, by the 1990s it depended principally on the production of wool textiles for export to the United States and Europe (see Stephen, 1991). Like Juchitán, Teotitlán has conserved the Zapotec language, and its inhabitants have a sense of local ethnic pride bound up in language, local religious traditions, and craft production.

Another important aspect of Teotitlán's economy is the export of people. Since first sending men as workers under the Bracero Program of the 1940s, Teotitecos have continued to migrate to the United States, primarily to California. Almost six decades of migration experience have resulted in permanent transnational economic, cultural, and family ties that stretch from Oaxaca to Rosarita, Tijuana, and Santa Ana (south of Los Angeles). Many Teotitecos have become permanent residents in the United States, and their children are English-speaking U.S. citizens. Among this population, many men and women have legalized their immigration status under the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (often called the amnesty law) and, while they maintain strong contacts with their families, are permanently rooted in the United States. The experience of these migrants has been important in adding to the ideas about gender and sexuality that permeate the community in Oaxaca.

Like that in Juchitán, life in Teotitlán is strongly segregated by gender. Men and women often work separately, coming together to eat in the morning and evening, and during ritual occasions they remain separate except when dancing. Traditional ritual dancing involves one man and one woman dancing detached in a three-step *jarabe*, moving in opposite directions (see Stephen, 1991). At contemporary birthday parties, *quinceañeras*, and other more secular occasions men and women dance in close physical contact, in a light embrace. Except for dancing, women spend all of their time at fiestas working and socializing with women, often telling sexual jokes, gossiping about recent sexual affairs and new pairs of *novios* (young men and women who have fallen in love), and sometimes making fun of some of the men present in sexually explicit ways.

Women's experience of sexuality tends to vary significantly by age and by migration status. While I lived and worked in Teotitlán (1984-1986, part of 1987 and 1988, periodically in the 1990s, and in summer 2001) I attended several traditional engagement parties, in which the young man's family comes to petition for the bride at four in the morning, bearing large baskets of chocolate, bread, and giant candles. This ceremony is one of several ceremonies associated with traditional weddings performed over a period of years. After the official engagement ceremony, a young woman will go to live with

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her future husband and will often have one or two children with him before the church wedding. Even this formal set of ceremonies exhibits an interesting disjuncture between virginity and formal marriage. The other prominent form of engagement is *por robar* (by theft), which usually means a carefully planned voluntary elopement. Most women in the community, whether young or old, are concerned with protecting their sexual reputations. Many girls are still strictly watched and not allowed to walk the streets alone after the age of 10 or 11.

Most older women (over 40) in Teotitlán have been married either by a traditional set of engagement and wedding ceremonies or by elopement and a smaller wedding ceremony—the former being dependent on access to financial resources. As the number of female migrants increases, more and more younger women are entering into common-law marriages that follow a pattern of serial monogamy in the places where they live outside of the community—Tijuana, Rosarita, Los Angeles, Santa Ana. After some years, a couple may decide to return to Teotitlán and go through the traditional series of ceremonies culminating in a wedding. These women and many young men are no longer under the authority of their parents and can choose their own sexual partners. Even in such situations, however, women are concerned about their sexual reputations. Cohabitation is considered a legitimate form of sexual expression; having multiple sexual partners is not. Young men are discouraged from having sexual affairs when married but, in contrast, are often told to experiment before they settle down.

Teotitlán also has a third gender category for men similar to the *muxe*. Called *biza'ah*, this category includes fewer men than that of *muxe* (one study estimates that 6 percent of males in one Isthmus Zapotec community in the early 1970s were *muxe* [see Rymph, 1974, cited in Chiñas, 1995: 300]). While living in Teotitlán I found about seven men who were publicly acknowledged as fitting this category. Four of them were married, two lived with their parents, and one lived alone. They were identified by their speech and way of walking and the work they engaged in. Several were experts in making ceremonial candles, a vocation they shared with a few women in the community. They were not referred to as "homosexual" and were not made fun of in any public context. Some people appreciated their special artisan skills and sense of aesthetics. One individual was considered unusual more because he lived alone than because of his gender status but was well-liked by children and provided a social space for some adolescents in his home. I never heard anyone label sexuality explicitly as heterosexual, homosexual, or

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bisexual. The most prominent public discourses on sexuality were jokes and rumors, circulated as often by women as by men.

Both married men and married women were often rumored to be having sexual affairs. While some men jealously guarded their wives (even insisting on driving them to the marketplace), others allowed their wives and daughters considerable independence. Wealthier merchant men often spent much of their time in the state capital of Oaxaca or traveling and were presumed to have sexual affairs, but it was assumed that their wives perhaps did the same.

Gender as an organizing principle continues to be a key aspect of social life. Sexuality is certainly linked to gender but is not usually a separate aspect of social identity in public discourses in the community. This has begun to change significantly among Teotitecos living in the United States, where sexual-identity terms from the lexicon of popular American culture—gay, bisexual, homosexual, lesbian, and *joto* and *maricón* (derogatory terms for a passive homosexual man)—have become part of people's vocabularies. These labels have begun to be imported into the community and used by some there as well.

Migration appears to be a major factor in changing sexual interactions among young men and women as they move out of their parents' sphere of authority and cohabit outside of marriage. The contrast between this type of marital and sexual relationship and the notions of preserving virginity, the "theft" of women, and formal petitions for marriage suggest the influence of Spanish colonial systems of gender, honor, and sexuality and urban Mexican and U.S. cultures and experiences. The existence of a third gender role for men that is blended with marriage and fatherhood signals the continued importance of indigenous systems of gender.

HISTORICAL ROOTS

In both of the above descriptions gender is a basic category of social organization and continues to be of primary importance for the codification and understanding of sexual behavior. In the sections that follow I would like to suggest four key historical influences on the contemporary construction of gender and sexuality in Zapotec Oaxaca: Zapotec indigenous systems of gender organization and others that allow for a third gender role for men, Spanish colonial systems of gender and appropriate sexual behavior for women, nationalist constructions of gender that pressured women to emulate the ideal of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and U.S. and Mexican popular culture.

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ZAPOTEC SYSTEMS OF GENDER COMPLEMENTARITY AND THIRD GENDER ROLES

While there has been some discussion of Nahua concepts of gender (see Klein, 1997; Cline, 1986; Clendinnen, 1991; Kellogg, 1997), little has been written about gender among the Zapotec before the arrival of the Spanish. Both Mexica and Zapotec societies were stratified, and proving lineage was a prerequisite to social rank, privilege, and political office. The Zapotec political system, like the Mixtec (Spores, 1997), was controlled by a hereditary elite that was reinforced by alliances built through marriage and military conquest. Guaranteeing the parentage of elite offspring was critical to maintaining these alliances. This no doubt encouraged the supervision of elite women's sexual interactions; rules regulating the sexual behavior of commoners may have been different.

Lisa Mary Sousa concludes from an analysis of native women's participation in the colonial criminal courts from 1570 to 1750 that "concepts of complementarity shaped Mixtec and Zapotec gender roles" (1997: 200). Sousa assumes that precolonial Zapotec gender systems were two-gender systems (male and female), at least among the elite (1997: 201).

> Mixtec and Zapotec cosmologies reveal a gendered view of the universe and of life-sustaining relations underscoring the centrality of the concepts of complementarity. Both societies conceive of the universe as composed of two parts; a female earth and a male sky. Rain symbolized sexual exchange in the center that fertilizes and produces life on earth. Preconquest and sixteenth-century codices, which provide important clues to indigenous ideology, also contain evidence of the complementary nature of Mixtec gender relations . . . both male and female elements were necessary to symbolize Mixtec social, economic, and political life. . . .

This same assumption underlies characterizations of other precolonial state societies such as the Nahua (Burkhart, 1997). While a two-gender system may have been important among elites in pre-Hispanic state societies, the writings of Spanish chroniclers suggest the presence of nondichotomized gender systems among indigenous peoples in what became New Spain. The persistence of a third gender role among contemporary Zapotecs for bodies that are sexed as male suggests that state societies such as the Zapotec and the Mexica may have had overlapping gender systems that included not only elite gender complementarity but also other systems that allowed for three or more genders. Since it is often acknowledged that state societies such as the Mexica and the Zapotec incorporated other deities and religious ideas into local and regional cosmologies, it is not inconceivable that more than one

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system of structuring gender could have coexisted at the local level in Zapotec communities—one directed at elites and another more closely associated with commoners.

While the Spanish chroniclers emphasized cannibalism and paganism among the Nahua, their tales of indigenous customs elsewhere in what became Mexico emphasized sodomy and gender ambiguity. Spanish mores focused on ascetic self-control and the limitation of sexual outlets as a point of honor as well as emphasizing a strongly dichotomous and hierarchical gender system that valued males and masculinity far more than females and femininity. Many of the indigenous peoples of the Americas were quite different in their gender system constructs and in their ideas about what constituted appropriate sexual behavior.

The concept of the berdache has been used in anthropology and history to characterize men and sometimes women recorded as exhibiting social characteristics and sexual behavior that fell outside of their "appropriate" gender roles (male and female, with sexual activity focusing on reproduction). Obviously such readings are highly subjective. Debates have raged among anthropologists about whether such individuals were (1) gender crossing (Whitehead, 1981: 86), (2) a third gender (Roscoe, 1991: 212; Jacobs, 1983), (3) androgynes (Williams, 1986) or (4) half-man/half-woman (Gutiérrez, 1991: 34-36). As pointed out by Midnight Sun (1988: 34), the word "berdache" is derived from a Persian word meaning "kept boy" or "prostitute" and was "first applied by French explorers to designate 'passive' partners in homosexual relationships between Native American males."[1] What appears to have happened is that a variety of gender, sexual, and social roles that did not conform to the ideals of a dual male/female gender system were historically lumped together under the one term, "berdache." This tells us more about the conqueror's system of gender and sexuality than it does about the indigenous peoples they encountered.

Bernal Díaz del Castillo, in an exploration of the coast of Yucatán in 1517, discovered clay figures in which "the Indians seemed to be engaged in sodomy, one with the other" (Williams, 1986: 135). While accompanying Cortés on his conquest of Mexico in 1519, he often commented on the widespread practice of same-sex relations (Guerra, 1971: 123-124, cited in Williams, 1986: 135). He documented Cortés's pausing along the Veracruz coast to tell his indigenous allies, "You must not commit sodomy or do the other ugly things you are accustomed to do" (Díaz del Castillo, 1956: 202, cited in Williams, 1986: 137). While some chroniclers may have exaggerated the prevalence of male-male sexual relations in order to justify Spanish massacres,[2] sexual behavior between men labeled by the Spanish as sodomy and of men dressing and acting like women certainly seem to have been present.

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Among the Timucu in what became Florida, observers saw what they called "hermaphrodites" taking care of the sick and working beside women. Two engravings from 1591 show muscular bodies with long hair carrying the sick and working with women to carry food. The engravings were produced from sketches made by Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues during an expedition to Florida in 1564 (in Williams, 1986: appendix and plates 3 and 4). According to Coreal (1722: 34), the Timucuan men labeled as "hermaphrodites" by the Spanish could be distinguished from both men and women by the color of the feathers they wore in their hair. Native Floridians allowed marriages between men according to Torquemada (1943: 427). Such men also participated in sexual activity labeled as sodomy.

As the Spanish explored northern Mexico, which later became the American Southwest, they found same-sex sexual interaction among men and men who seemed to be dressed like women. Hernando de Alarcón, who visited tribes along the Lower Colorado River, reported an old man's showing him something quite amazing, "a son of his dressed as woman and used as such" (Roscoe, 1991: 172). Pedro de Castañeda, on the Coronado expedition, also noted the presence "of berdaches and described various tribes as *grandes someticos*, or great sodomites" (Roscoe, 1991: 172; see Hammond and Rey, 1940).

Among the Zuni, the Spanish encountered the "half-men/half-women," as the natives knew them, or berdaches, the term used by Europeans (Gutiérrez, 1991: 33). Among the Zuni, the half-man/half-woman was a biological male who assumed the dress, occupations, mannerisms, and sexual comportment of females as a result of a sacred vision or selection by the community to fill the role (1991: 34). A Zuni half-man/half-woman or *lhamana* was a symbol of cosmic harmony and controlled the power fields of what was both male and female: women controlled creation, and men asserted that they controlled all aspects of human life through their control of ritual (1991: 35). The *lhamana* were publicly initiated and were often married to Zuni "men." After initiation they were also sexually available to young bachelors in their communities. As Gutiérrez notes, the Spanish called the young *lhamanas* "whores" (*putos*), making them linguistically equivalent to European female prostitutes (1991: 34). The same linguistic label was given to men engaged in male-male sexual interactions. López de Gama wrote of men having sex together under the full moon in Panaco, north of Veracruz, and referred to them as *grandísimos putos* (Requeña, 1945: 51, cited in Taylor, 1995: 85).

Lancaster (1992: 242) describes male *cochones* in contemporary Nicaragua as taking a passive position in sexual relations with other men, often married: "Cochones are therefore feminine men, or more accurately, feminized men, not fully male men. They are men who are 'used' by other men. . . .

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Consequently, when one 'uses' a cochón, one acquires masculinity; when one is 'used' as a cochón, one expends it." The labeling system of *activo* and *pasivo* found in Central America and in some Mexican male-male sexual interactions may in part be traced back to early explorers' labeling of men who were having sex with one another as *putos*—feminizing them by making them the equivalent of women.[3] It also reflects the hierarchical nature of the Spanish dual gender system, in which masculinity dominated femininity.

While the Zuni and other indigenous ethnic groups integrated the social, sexual, and cultural roles of *lhamana* and *muxe* into their societies, Spanish observers and interpreters were bound by their own gender and sexuality system to stigmatize sex with *lhamanas* as equivalent to other "bad" sex—sex outside of marriage and not for procreation.

Because Spanish systems of marriage and inheritance were tied to a hierarchical two-gender system expressed through heterosexual monogamous marriage, the Spanish chroniclers were unable to envision the possibility of marriage between two men, just as they were unable to understand the polygyny practiced by Nahua nobles and other indigenous men. The Spanish system of gender and appropriate sexual behavior focused on maintaining family honor through guaranteeing women's chastity and the purity of family lineages. Such ideas overlapped to a certain degree with the interests of indigenous elites, who wanted to be able to continue to claim a distinctive status vis-à-vis commoners under Spanish rule. A key difference between elite indigenous systems of gender and those of the Spanish is the difference between complementarity and hierarchy. The ideal of gender complementarity has clearly undergone significant change. The impact of Spanish colonial ideas about proper gender roles and sexual behavior, particularly for women, can be seen in the two Zapotec communities profiled above in the more "traditional" practices regulating marriage such as formally soliciting the parents' permission and guaranteeing a young woman's virginity to her future husband and his family.

SPANISH GENDER AND APPROPRIATE SEXUALITY: HONOR, CHASTITY, AND PURITY OF BLOOD

The concept of honor was significant for those who considered themselves to be among the elite in New Spain. It wove together the doctrine of the church on sanctified marriages and legitimate births and the notion of purity of blood by which the upper strata proved that their ancestors had not been Moors, Jews, or heretics in Spain or Indians or blacks in New Spain. As summed up by Ann Twinam (1989: 123),

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> Honor was not only a heritage of racial and religious purity, but a family history of proper action, as signified by generations of sanctified marriages and of legitimate births. The three most important documents in a colonists' life—the birth certificate, the marriage certificate, and the will— . . . provided the basis for elaborate family genealogies that colonial elites maintained and treasured as proof that a chain of religiously confirmed, racially pure marriages and legitimate births bound them to past generations.

While illegitimacy could affect both men and women as children and adults, the question of family honor was linked most closely to a restricted female sexuality. Women who engaged in sexual transgressions could not only lose their own reputations but produce illegitimate children who would break the chain of family honor. Upholding family honor required the control of female sexuality through virginity and marital chastity (Twinam, 1989: 124). The combination of the constraints on legitimate sexuality prescribed by the church and the necessity for defending family honor through restricted female sexuality provided many possibilities for sexual sin in early and mid-colonial Mexico.

The system of racial castes generated in colonial Mexico through the doctrine of purity of blood and its constraints on marriage came to be nominally important in regulating the sexual practices of all Mexicans. In their zeal to maintain racial purity, the Spanish officials and the Catholic Church shifted their focus from policing deviant forms of sexuality and gender to ensuring racial purity through monogamous marriage. This ideology was reinforced in rural areas as well as in the cities. While the increasing mixture of the population over time defied the ever-increasing complexity and subjective nature of the caste system, a shift in focus to monogamy no doubt provided an opening for the continuation of same-sex sexual relations. Such sexual relations could bring sexual pleasure but without producing offspring. Moreover, they did not reveal the racial mixing of those who engaged in them by producing "mixed race" children. For men, this no doubt had a particular advantage; they could appear to be monogamously married but still enjoy additional sexual outlets. This may account for how men in roles such as *muxe* and *biza'ah* sometimes combined them with marriage and having children.

Originally used to refer to the genealogical purity of Christians—purity from the blood of Jews, Muslims, and heretics—*limpieza de sangre* was used in Spain to prevent those with "stains" on their ancestry from holding important political and clerical offices or entering universities, religious and military orders, and certain guilds (Martínez, 1997: 749). Blended with the Mediterranean concept of honor associated with noble status, the doctrine was imported into New Spain. Endogamous marriage and legitimate birth were critical to maintaining purity, and the ideology of racial purity reinforced

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Spanish and Catholic notions about the proper sexual behavior of women. As summed up by Martínez (1997: 750):

> Since it was primarily the woman who, through adultery, could introduce "unclean" blood into a lineage, reproducing purity of blood necessitated guarding the chastity and premarital virginity of Old Christian women . . . controlling the sexuality of Old Christian women before and after marriage came to be as much a matter of "purity" as it was about "honor."

While Spanish elite notions of purity of blood and women's premarital chastity were not the primary or the only ideological elements that influenced life in Zapotec communities during and after colonialism, the continued presence of the Catholic Church, resident priests, and high levels of contact between local officials from Teotitlán del Valle and Juchitán and the Oaxacan state government suggest that such ideas were certainly part of the ideological context structuring gender and sexual behavior in both communities. Another important mainstream source of ideological influence regarding female gender and appropriate sexual behavior stems from one of the key symbolic icons of Mexican nationalism, the Virgin of Guadalupe, and, by extension, all virgins in local religious pantheons.

THE VIRGIN OF GUADALUPE: NATIONALISM WRITTEN ON A FEMALE INDIGENOUS BODY

The Virgin of Guadalupe is an indigenous virgin who has become the patron saint of Mexico. The apparition of the Virgin was first made known by a Mexican priest, Miguel Sánchez, in a book published in 1648 directed at *criollos* (those of European descent born in the Americas) (Poole, 1997: 1536). According to Garibay (1967: 821), "On December 9, 1531, the Indian Juan Diego saw the Virgin Mary at Tepeyac, a hill northwest of Mexico City. She instructed him to have the Bishop Zumárraga build a church on the site. Three days later in a second appearance she told Juan Diego to pick flowers and take them to the bishop. When he presented them as instructed, roses fell out of his mantle and beneath them was the painted image of the Lady." In the popular image of the brown virgin, her eyes are cast down and her hands clasped in prayer, and there is an angel at her feet. She is said to be compassionate. Analyses of the original painting point to indications that she is pregnant, as evidenced by a maternity band and the positioning of a small flower at her waist, which for the Nahua signified her pregnancy (Rodríguez, 1994: 29).

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In this story and national archetype, an indigenous woman assumes the role of virgin mother who, while compassionate, is not active. The Virgin of Guadalupe was the first Marian devotion in Mexico that was not strictly local and was cultivated by the intellectual classes as a symbol of *mexicanidad* (Mexicanness) (Poole, 1997: 1536). While the Virgin can represent both passivity and liberation (her image was carried as a banner in the struggle for independence and during the Mexican Revolution), she also embodies the fundamental contradiction of all virgin mothers: she is able to reproduce without losing her virginity—a difficult prospect for most Mexican women until the advent of recent reproductive technology (see Poole, 1995). While the emergence of the Virgin of Guadalupe as a major female icon was probably not consolidated in Mexican culture until well after independence and probably not equally so for all classes, the options she offers for framing women's sexuality are consistent with the gender ideology of *limpieza de sangre*—premarital virginity, sexuality focused on reproduction and monogamy. The importance of the Virgin of Guadalupe as a national symbol also dovetails with the emphasis on local saints and virgins as important gendered community icons in Teotitlán and Juchitán.

MIGRATION, POPULAR CULTURE, AND THE DEPLOYMENT OF SEXUAL IDENTITIES

While a double standard for women's sexual behavior appears to persist in places such as Juchitán and Teotitlán del Valle, it is being challenged by young people who migrate to the city of Oaxaca and create new neighborhoods there, as well as by people migrating to other parts of Mexico or to the United States. They have redefined legitimate sexuality for women to include both serial monogamy outside of legal marriage and limited premarital sex if it leads to marriage or a long-term committed relationship. The widespread availability of birth control in these destination areas means that most young women can envision the possibility of engaging in sex for pleasure rather than for purely reproductive reasons. At the same time, the imperative for women to have children in order to reach social adulthood also reinforces women's tie to sexuality through reproduction, as it does in much of the world.

Finally, while sexuality is not a primary category of social identity and most people do not automatically label themselves accordingly, the proliferation of discourses on sexuality as seen in *telenovelas* (television dramas similar to American soaps), comic books, movies, and daily life in urban Mexico and in the United States results in some level of understanding among most people that there is such a concept. As Gutmann (1996: 129) says of Mexico

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City, cultural comments about sexuality "announce a growing lexicon that in turn points to new understandings on some level that people *have* sexualities, that these sexualities are part of what makes someone who he or she is, and that alternative sexualities are viable, at least for some." Discourses about sexuality and sex for pleasure instead of for reproduction are slowly being introduced into Zapotec communities through the experiences of migrants. In the months of December and January, when many migrants from both inside and outside of Mexico return to Teotitlán and Juchitán, conversations are sprinkled with references to people's experiences outside their communities. From *los hombres gay* who are described on the streets of California to *los y las homosexuales* marching in a demonstration in Mexico City, the presence of different sexualities is being articulated in these Zapotec communities alongside discussions of *muxe*, passionate (supposedly secret) affairs between married men and women, traditional weddings, and the latest news on children born to young unmarried couples living in Tijuana, Mexico City, and Los Angeles.

CONCLUSIONS

In both of the Zapotec communities discussed here and in Mexico at large, gender is a significant factor of social life. While pre-Hispanic stratified societies such as the Mexica, Mixtec, and Zapotec were characterized by dichotomous gender systems for elites that focused on male/female complementarity, other documented indigenous societies had more flexible gender systems that offered third gender roles or the possibility of androgyny. Because of the persistence of a third gender role for males in Zapotec communities, I have suggested that before the arrival of the Spanish there may have been more than one model for gender definitions and relations. The elite model of male/female complementarity may have been supplemented by another system that included a third gender role, one that clearly clashed with Spanish definitions of appropriate gender relations and legitimate sexual activity. The Juchitec male gender role of the *muxe* remains distinct from the system of active/passive sexual relations between men documented in urban areas such as Guadalajara by Carrier (1995) and in Nicaragua by Lancaster (1992). While an active/passive system of sexual relations suggests inequality and hierarchy, the role of the *muxe* is defined not in terms of power or its absence in sexual interactions but in terms of the gendered social relations of work, food, dress, speech, and ritual.

The persistence of such roles alerts us to the importance of understanding the centrality of gender in relation to discussions of sexuality. The tendency

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to separate what is now perceived as homosexuality from heterosexuality in historical discussions disguises the interrelationships between different kinds of sexual behavior and the shifting nature of these categories through time. It is quite certain that the labels "heterosexual" and "homosexual" were not in common usage in Mexico until at least the latter part of the nineteenth century because they were not in use anywhere else. Where gender is the primary organizing category and gender systems vary for people in different social and economic locations, it makes little sense to talk about hetero- and homosexuality.

At the same time, in contemporary rural Oaxaca, where many communities are characterized by high rates of migration both within and outside of Mexico, the notion of sexuality is being employed in public conversations and through popular culture, including television, videos, comics, books, and movies (see Foucault, 1980). Sexual-identity labels in the abstract and in specific forms collide with practiced public silence about sex and about who is doing what with whom and what it is called. Perhaps most notable is the dawning public recognition of women as sexual beings who, once removed from their communities of origin, can make autonomous choices of sexual partners and envision sex for pleasure instead of only as a reproductive activity. The political economy of location and class in Juchitán and Teotitlán is also important in determining who may engage in these newer discourses and practices of sexuality. What a young woman can do while living away from home in Mexico City or Los Angeles may be quite different from what she can do at home if she is from a status-seeking family that wants her to pursue a traditional wedding and return to her community to live and raise a family.

The various sexual behaviors that coexist today in places like Juchitán and Teotitlán del Valle in rural Oaxaca, the simultaneous presence and absence of sexual labeling, and the centrality of gender as an organizing principle in sexual behavior suggest that sexuality and sexual identity have not been evenly deployed in concepts of social identity and selfhood. Instead of a Oaxacan or even a Zapotec sexuality, we see multiple historical strands of identity that have commingled for more than 500 years and continue to be in constant motion. The simultaneous influence in Zapotec communities of indigenous, Spanish colonial, and contemporary urban and transnational systems of gender and ideas about sex and sexuality suggests a rich and interesting future.

NOTES

1. The use of the word "homosexual" here is problematic as no such concept existed in native societies until it did in Western societies.

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2. For example, Vasco Nuñez de Balboa who, after seeing men dressed like women in Panama and learning they were sodomites, threw the king and 40 others to be eaten by his dogs (Guerra, 1971: 190).

3. See the work of Carrier (1995) and Alonzo and Koreck (1993) for further comments on the *activo/pasivo* labeling system among men.

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